



# Life After Clerking: Reflections & Advice From My Time Working for the Court

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## My Timeline with the Tennessee Appellate Courts

- (Summer 2009) – Internship with 21<sup>st</sup> Judicial District in Williamson County
- September 2011: Began clerking for then-Judge Bivins on the Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals
- July 2014: Judge Bivins appointed to Tennessee Supreme Court; I began clerkship with Justice Bivins on the Tennessee Supreme Court
- September 2016: Justice Bivins appointed Chief Justice; I moved into new role as staff attorney for the Tennessee Supreme Court
- In November 2021, I accepted the role of Academic Director for the Fred D. Gray Institute for Law, Justice & Society at Lipscomb University. I left the appellate courts at the end of 2021.

## Why I Stayed...

- Interesting cases and legal issues
- Wonderful mentors and colleagues – working with incredible people and legal minds!
- Opportunities for advancement/ new projects within the court system
- Flexible working situation as a young parent

## In the Meantime...

- I taught as an adjunct professor at Lipscomb University the entire time I worked for the Tennessee courts. (Fall 2011-Fall 2020)
- I was active with the LAW Marion Griffin Chapter, as well as the Williamson County Inn of Court
- I joined a Board of Directors for a nonprofit I love.
- I organized the Tennessee Supreme Court annual law clerk and staff attorney training/retreat. I planned out the itinerary in conjunction with judicial conferences.
- I pursued other endeavors within the court system as part of my role working for the appellate courts

## As a new attorney/ junior law clerk:

- **First and foremost, produce an excellent, timely work product for your judge. Having your judge's recommendation on the back end of your clerkship is priceless!**
  - Always go beyond the expectations of the judge as far as deadlines, etc.
- **Join bar associations or other local legal organizations – networking is vitally important to your next steps professionally!**
  - Inns of Court
  - Nashville Bar Foundation – Leadership Forum (3-8 years experience)
  - LAW Marion Griffin Chapter
- **Take time to discern where you might want to work next:**

Big law? Small practice? Corporate? Nonprofit? Government? Academia?

Go to lunch or coffee with people in various positions as you discern where you would like to be.
- **Utilize any opportunity your judge might give you to make connections:**
  - Meetings you take on behalf of the judge
  - Speechwriting, attending events with the judge
  - Even taking or making phone calls for your judge might yield some great connections!
  - If your judge is part of a bar association or legal network, ask if you might be able to attend an event with him/her. It would give you a chance to see whether it's a place you want to get involved, and you can meet some of that judge's contacts.

## As a new attorney/ junior law clerk (cont'd):

- **Get to know your fellow law clerks!**
  - Schedule times outside of work to get to know each other
  - Examples: monthly lunches, book clubs, recreational sports leagues, etc.
  - These individuals will know more than anyone the quality of your work ethic. Stay connected!
- **Get to know others in the building: clerk staff, staff attorneys, judges**
  - You never know what a conversation might yield. Get to know people and be kind!
- **Stay connected with colleagues and mentors from law school**
  - Your law school, especially if it is local, likely will have access to job openings and opportunities. Keep your mentors updated on what you are doing.
- **Find meaningful outlets for you as a person**
  - Law school likely was all-consuming of your time and attention. Use the extra time you now have in the evenings and on weekends to find new activities you enjoy.
  - Community service, learning a new hobby, creative writing
  - Take a class through a TN college
  - Over time, these side hobbies and interests might lead to unexpected opportunities or connections!

## Thinking of pursuing a career clerkship or staff attorney position?

- **Your consistent, quality work output will make you indispensable.**
  - Your goal is to have judges come to trust your legal research and analysis. Building this trust and rapport takes time.
- **Find an area of expertise**
  - Most staff attorneys concentrate on a particular area of the law. It makes them valuable to the Court to provide advice when such issues arise.
  - Again, this comes from experience. Most staff attorneys have practiced law or worked for the court system for decades. They have a wealth of institutional knowledge, which is invaluable to the appellate courts.
- **Get to know others in similar positions and ask for their advice.**
  - My staff attorney position didn't exist at the time I pursued it.

## Thinking of pursuing a career clerkship or staff attorney position?

- **Keep your eyes and ears open for new opportunities with judges across the State**
  - Often, law clerks move from chambers to chambers. A great law clerk will have the recommendation of their judge should a new opportunity arise.
- **Also be aware of potential openings with the AOC**
  - Some great positions for attorneys also exist at the AOC! Stay informed of any openings that arise over there as well.
- **Take advantage of ALL the State benefits**
  - Retirement information (the latter part of this CLE)
  - Investment opportunities – always maximize those benefits
  - Health insurance, etc., is some of the best available
- **If you stay long enough, look into federal PSLF (Public Service Loan Forgiveness)**
  - There are many rules, so start checking early to see if you qualify
  - There might be other jobs after clerking that also would count toward your years working in public service. Again, check into all the rules.

## Would I change anything?

- **I would have pursued an LLM while working as a law clerk/ staff attorney.**
  - I decided early on that I wanted to go into academia eventually, so pursuing an LLM would have been a good use of my spare time.
- **I would have found outlets for writing legal articles.**
  - But do this with caution! And only with your judge's blessing!
- **Ultimately, I'm thankful I was patient.**
  - There were times I felt a pull to go somewhere else or pursue a new opportunity, but I never had peace in leaving my position(s) with the appellate courts. When this opportunity at Lipscomb University arose, I knew the timing was right.